

## The ethic-aesthetic way of wonders

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**Abstract:** Developments in the theoretical field of *ecosophy* have demonstrated the co-dependence of different human and natural factors, as well as connections between societal organization, natural sustainability and individual experience. Exploring these complex and organic relations between the social, the mental and the environmental, is an important task for contemporary research. A central question is *where* and *how* such research can be undertaken. This article traces central ecosophical lines of thinking, links them to ethic and aesthetic theory, and shows how these theories stand in a direct relation to three contemporary, on-going art projects. Ecosophy is proposed as a relational and practice-near research ideology, depending on the complexity-oriented principles of relationality, ethicality and immediacy. Finally, aesthetic research and research through art emerge as field-merging and practical-theoretical approaches, which should be given more attention and resources in current science and education politics. As an alternative field of knowledge production, referring to Jacques Ranci eres 'distribution of the sensuous' as well as phenomenological epistemology, ethic-aesthetic research not only constitutes new ways of sensing, but acknowledges larger parts of what we already know.

**Keywords:** Ethics, ecosophy, visual arts, aesthetic research.

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Concern for the environment and the climate, and more widely for sustainability in human actions, is no longer a romantic longing. It is a political fact as well as an aesthetic matter. In the field of and surrounding contemporary art, there has in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries been a development towards different forms of experimental and experiential (art) organization. A central goal has been the production of knowledge about, or reflection in relation to, various aspects of sustainability, and to establish clusters of collaborating institutions and individuals have become an ethic-aesthetic approach. Artistic practices are unfolding as combinations of ethics, science and sensuousness. By assembling a range of participants from friends to specialists, and by using an array of different methods in order to deal with different social, mental or environmental tasks, contemporary art has become both practice-based research and research-based practice. This gives it the ability to (re)activate and (re)focus important issues and to propose alternative ways of wondering.

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Figure 1: Opening of Alexandre Perigot's 'Elvis' House' at 'the land', Sanpatong, 2006.

The connotation of ecology should cease to be tied to the image of a small minority of people in love with nature or to (self-)defined specialists.<sup>2</sup> (Guattari, 1989, p.48)

Developments in the theoretical field of *ecosophy* have shown us the co-dependence of different human and natural factors, as well as connections between societal organization, natural sustainability and individual experience. From the 'deep ecology' of Arne Næss, through to Gregory Bateson's 'ecology of mind' and the 'three ecologies' of Félix Guattari, we have acquired not only a co-thinking of human and nature, but also an acknowledgement of the importance of mind and sociality for human environmental and aesthetic (inter)action. To explore these complex and organic relations between the social, the mental and the environmental thus becomes an important task for contemporary research. A central question is *where* and *how* such research can be undertaken.

In the following I will trace some central ecosophical lines of thinking, link them to ethic and aesthetic theories, and show how these theories relate directly to three contemporary, on-going art projects. Further, I will propose ecosophy as a relational and 'practice-near' research ideology, depending among other things on the complexity-oriented principles of relationality, ethicality and immediacy. Finally, aesthetic research and research through art emerge as field-merging and practical-theoretical approaches, which should be given more attention and resources in current science and education policy. As an alternative field of knowledge production, referring to Jacques Rancière's 'distribution of the sensuous' as well as phenomenological epistemology, ethic-aesthetic research constitutes not only new ways of sensing, but acknowledges larger parts of what we already know.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> My translation, original text: "La connotation de l'écologie devrait cesser d'être liée à l'image d'une petite minorité d'amoureux de la nature ou de spécialistes attirés." (Guattari, 1989, p.48).

<sup>3</sup> This article is partly based on passages from the Ph.D. dissertation *Mobile Homes – Perspectives on Situatedness and De-Situatedness in Contemporary Practice and Theory*, University of Oslo, 2009, ref. chapter 5 "Ecology: Environment, Relation and Sustainability" (Christensen-Scheel, 2009).



Figure 2: The nord land, Kjellingvann, 2005. Photo: Sørfinnset School / the nord land.

## Ecology as a relational principle

The word biology stems from the Greek word for life, *bios*, and ecology stems from the Greek word *oikos*, which means *home* or *household*. Biology is thus the study of life, while ecology can be thought of as the study of ‘home life’ or the *conditions for life*. Ecological research can be said to focus on three main areas: individual organisms, species interactions and communities/eco-systems (Begon, Townsend & Harper, 2006). The wider object of study is life and different *relations* between life and its environment – the object here being to find out what enables or hinders certain life forms under certain conditions at certain times. This of course includes relations between organisms, as all organisms influence the life, distribution and abundance of other organisms. The relational wholes of nature and organisms (biotic/living and abiotic/non-living environments) can be seen as communities or *ecosystems*. The term ecosystem describes the “biological community together with the abiotic environment in which it is set” (Begon, Townsend & Harper, 2006, p.499) – an ecosystem thus includes both living and non-living elements – the atmosphere, rocks, plants, animals and humans, all that is “a source and a sink for energy and matter” (Begon, Townsend & Harper, 2006, p.499). An ecosystem also traces the flows of energy and matter around the system, and the relatively constant consumption and release of energy constitute the sustainability and longevity of the system. Transferred to the human sphere this applies to human physical environment such as cities, houses, things, clothes, art, etc., as well as to social and psychological issues and dynamics.

Although the use of ecological concepts and sustainability as theoretical and philosophical principles is becoming obvious in this era of climatic instability and over-consumption, their use is in

fact part of a longer *eco-philosophical* or *ecosophical* tradition related to environmentally-conscious theoreticians inspired in part by the organic movement.<sup>4</sup> Ecology is a field of biological research that focuses particularly on the interrelations between organisms and environment. Since the 1970s and 80s, it has become associated with various movements that have worked for the preservation of these relationships and natural environments. Many of these could be categorised as what Arne Næss called *shallow ecology* – that is, a concern with simple environmental causes and issues without relating these issues to other chains and relations, and further, the omission of humans and sociality in this ecology. *Deep ecology*, however, is Næss’ conception of an eco-philosophy or ecosophy. It designates ecology as a fundamental way of thinking about the relations between nature, humans, and animals, not only refraining from polluting nature with toxic waste:

So an ecosophy becomes a philosophical world-view or system inspired by the conditions of life in the ecosphere ... A philosophical system has many components. Logic, general methodology, epistemology, ontology, descriptive and normative ethics, philosophy of science, political and social philosophy and general aesthetics are among the most well-known. Ecosophy ... says of this diversity: all are intimately connected! (Næss, 1989, p.38)

Ecology then concerns the understanding of the deep connections between and interrelatedness of, many different elements, with a focus on the relation and the necessity of the relation itself. Relations always indicate certain power structures, but ecology shows how these power structures are co- or inter-dependent. This indicates a dependency between the parts that goes *both ways*, thereby strengthening the “weaker” parts by emphasizing their “relational power”.



Figure 3: Free yoga class in the art gallery at Kunstnernes Hus, Oslo 2010. Courtesy of ‘Gentle Actions’, Eva Bakkeslett and Anne Karin Jortveit.

<sup>4</sup> Used by for example Félix Guattari, Arne Næss, Rosi Braidotti, Anthony Giddens, Kisho Kurokawa.

## Guattari's 'three ecologies'

More specifically, the concept of ecology that I propose here is based on the ecosophy of the philosopher and psychoanalyst Félix Guattari. In his *Three Ecologies* he suggests there are three important aspects that must be included into the concept of ecology or ecosophy; *the environmental*, *the social* and *the mental*. Guattari's tripartite ecological perspective provides a further analytical perspective: situations, projects, spaces and places, can be seen simultaneously as mental (psychological), social, and environmental (physical/geographical). Guattari thus makes a further pronunciation of the dynamics of Næss' deep ecology: an ecosophy can be considered based on the balance and mutuality between the different relations to the self, and the human community, as well as the larger environment, nature and animals. What characterizes ecological thinking is, as suggested, precisely this fine balance between many parts, where a displacement on a micro-level can easily have consequences on a macro-level, and vice versa. Further, the relationships between the many parts are seen as based on conflicts of interest and the fight for survival, rather than in the light of direct causal explanations: The view of structures as being formed by finely-tuned and complex symbiosis makes it impossible to define the "best" solution – as for example in system theoretician Niklas Luhmann's definition of 'hypercomplexity'<sup>5</sup>. Still, there is an ethical element to the ecological perspective, and Guattari does not view our choice of solution as a matter of indifference. Below I will sketch some notions that can be attached to the three ecologies, before we turn to the contemporary ethic-aesthetic art projects and their 'mode of research'.

### *Social ecology*

Social ecology deals with social communities and relations mainly between humans, but also with political and social organizations that necessarily relate to nature and all types of environment. Human (social) organizations have a deep impact on nature and the eco-system, and must therefore be seen in relation to it. Likewise, humans are influenced (made apparent by recent natural catastrophes) by their biotic and abiotic environments. Ecology is a "reactional" field of study that focuses on the co-existence of organisms in a milieu with other organisms, and on the benefits or risks of this co-existence. Clearly there are here many similarities with social theory. Traditional ecological research describes different forms of interactions or relations such as symbiosis (mutual benefit), predator-prey-relations or parasitic relations, which record the benefit or loss for the organisms involved, i.e. is the nature of the relation exploitative, mutual, neutral, competitive, fatal or beneficial (Begon, Townsend & Harper, 2006).

An ecosophical relation seeks a "life-sustaining" balance, though *not* indicating that nature itself is always sustainable. Balance and mutuality are seen as ecological principles, but this does not mean that balance always occurs by itself. Sustainability in the human community, reached on the basis of *balance* and reciprocity, is thus not a 'natural phenomenon'; it often has to be made, at least in the short term. It is important to note here that ecology, sustainability and mutuality are not about a one-sided "turn towards nature"<sup>6</sup> and away from human control. Sustainability is about an *active, continuous balancing* of the three ecologies: this could involve natural adjustments within an eco-

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<sup>5</sup> "We term hypercomplex a system that is oriented to its own complexity and seeks to grasp this complexity, because the attempt – since it occurs within the system and must be established as selfdescription – produces more than itself. It also creates new kinds of possibilities for unforeseen reactions." (Luhmann, 1984/1995, p.471)

<sup>6</sup> Arne Næss in this concern points out "the dangers of ecologism" where ecology is seen as "the ultimate science" (Næss, 1989, p. 39).

system, or it could be the economic balancing we attempt in social systems through taxes, social welfare, etc. Such balancing may thus happen by itself through change in physical (and other) life grounds, or it may actively be sought in the human sphere, for example through principles of inclusion and democracy.

### ***Mental ecology***

The concept of mental ecology views the human personal psyche and mental health as part of the ecosystem. The human mind distinguishes itself from the rest of nature, but is nevertheless an important part of the ecosphere. To comprehend this interdependence between the different levels of the ecosphere, one must consider the individual subject as a driving force, in addition to political and environmental changes and ideas. Guattari thus broadens the idea of ecology to include a vastly more complex idea of the relation as a balance between physical, abstract and psychological parts, not only designating specific relations in nature, or relations between “humans” and “nature”, but including relations *between* and *within* humans as well. Guattari, who was a psychoanalyst trained by Jacques Lacan, was engaged in a search for an alternative to Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalysis, based as it was on more clearly defined subjects and diagnoses.

Guattari together with Gilles Deleuze developed a more fluid and un-defined idea of the subject as constantly changing, defined as much by the present and future as by the past. The subject is understood as the combination of *vectors of subjectification* (such as space, inheritance, genetics, family, friends, lovers, society, milieu, personal inclinations, memories, influence, intuition, and more): as a situational constellation in a particular room at a particular time (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004). This approach may be said to make the human psyche, as well as the treatment of it, more complex, but also more hopeful. You are not what you always have been; you are a mix of your own self and others, with the possibility of change in the present and the future.

Biologist and system theoretician Gregory Bateson combines ethical and ecological dimensions in his approach to the ecology of ideas and of the mind – structures of influence between humans are part of “the ecology of ideas” in relationships, and, further, these structures are “part of the larger ecological system within which that relationship exists.” Bateson also places the concept of ecology in a further “mental” context, pointing out that our ideas about ourselves, ecology, and the ecosphere always include ourselves: “Herein lays the charm and terror of ecology” he says “ – that the ideas of this science are irreversibly becoming a part of our own ecosocial system.” (Bateson, 2000, p.512). The human mind is thus one of the most important features of a deep or expanded ecosophy, and perhaps represents the greatest challenge.

### ***Environmental ecology***

Environmental ecology is what we usually think of as ‘ecology’. The environmental is tied to *physical surroundings*. However, physical surroundings are both natural and (wo)man-made, both nature and culture. Physical surroundings also influence social and individual behaviour, right from indicating or deciding movements (streets/roads/paths, walls, hills, rooms, fields, mugs of coffee) to creating settings and potentialities (comfort, discomfort, refuge, sensations). But the environment is also thought of as being something unto itself: nature is not necessarily seen from a human or anthropocentric perspective; it both exists and has a value without human perception or use of it. As humans we will however always speak from our own point of view, and total egalitarianism with all animals, plants and insects, is neither realizable nor wished for.

Further, sustainability is also a matter of consideration, and can be viewed differently from different perspective: it is most often not a given what is the most sustainable or ethic solution. Further, what gains one part, may harm another. Thus the *identification* of different forms of relationality and mutuality becomes a central ecosophical perspective. Following, our relations, to for example animals, products or services, should be made tangible or visible. For the most part, not knowing how the material world around us is produced and organized makes our relation with our environment as material and resources almost non-existent. From the ecosophical perspective, the physical environment is in a continuous relation to us. In urban living however, we are distanced from almost all material and physical production processes that generate what we consume (Sennett, 2009). This, one could argue, makes us socially and mentally more distant as well. To *reactivate* and *re-physicalize* the relational processes then becomes a central ethical and ecosophical goal with social and mental implications – based on both anthropocentric and non-anthropocentric arguments.



Figure 4: Opening buffet at the land foundation, Chiang Mai, 2006.

## Necessarily ethical

Environment, nature and physicality are necessarily given particular weight from an ecosophical perspective, because they are seen as valuable in and of themselves. Our concern here, drawn from Guattari, is how we can connect this physicality to all the social and mental processes we normally are tied up in. The ethical dimension of life, here connected to relational and ecosophical ideologies must be made to encompass more social and personal relevance. In the online version of the Oxford English Dictionary, *ethics* is defined as “The science of morals; the department of study concerned with the principles of human duty.” Ethics in this way has been, and still is, to a large extent, treated as something that imposes a duty or an obligation, something often applied involuntarily to humans with negative consequences, such as control and notions of shame. Moral philosopher Arne Johan Vetlesen points out this aura of negativity or primary concern with the negative aspects of ethics, where ethics

is seen as an obligation or as something needed in case of offence (Vetlesen, 2007).<sup>7</sup> Ethics, in the sense of rules of conduct, or as prohibitions, are designed to hinder, seldom to enhance. The accusation of *moralism* is then also one of the most common objections to ethical principles.

Several philosophers have however proposed an alternative viewpoint where sociality and inter-humanity are more a fact, a point of departure, than an infliction or a discussion<sup>8</sup>. Existentialist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir's is one of these – her philosophy is based on the singular subject and her fight for freedom. Nevertheless she says that the other's "appeal" necessarily concerns us, because our individual projects become meaningful only through others. This however, requires the other individual to be free to appeal/respond and we likewise. The freedom of subjects as an ethical dimension, as a condition for being able to engage, motivate and help, is thus not only an individual concern, it is a common and collective concern indicating the always ambiguous, paradoxical relationship between self and others. This ambiguity constitutes the essence of de Beauvoir's ethics, making the subject fundamentally social and fundamentally ethical (de Beauvoir, 1947; Pettersen, 2009). If the subject is defined as social and ethics as a necessity, the marginalized existence of others concerns each subject directly. Arne Næss says: "Equal right to unfold potentials as a principle is not a practical norm about equal conduct towards all life forms. It suggests a guideline limiting killing, and more generally limiting obstruction of the unfolding of potentialities in others." (Næss, 1989, p.167). While this is an ideal, it also relates directly to practice. And as we now turn to examine three ecosophical art projects, we do so from the perspective of a non-moralistic and fundamentally relational ethicality.

## Ethic-aesthetic projects

Several contemporary art practices or experimental projects are working actively with the relations or tensions in tripartite ecology, as well as with the reintroduction of different physical dimensions as part of their ethic-aesthetic strategies. *The land foundation* (Rirkrit Tiravanija and Kamin Lertchaiprasert) in Thailand, *Sørfinnset school/the nord land* (Geir Tore Holm and Søsja Jørgensen) and *Gentle Actions* (Eva Bakkeslett og Anne Karin Jortveit) are all processually organized art projects with an ecological focus.<sup>9</sup> *The land foundation* was initiated in 1998 in Chiang Mai by two Thai artists, Kamin Lertchaiprasert and Rirkrit Tiravanija. Although the two initiators from the start have sought to move away from the idea of ownership, their names remain linked to the project. In addition to a "land" or rice field near the village of Sanpatong, the project have consisted of a sort of cultural centre in Chiang Mai, where there was an outdoor kitchen, a meditation house, an administration and an exhibition/workshop hall. However, these physical installations are perceived as functions, and can be modified to suit the project's prevailing needs or ideas – the cultural centre is to be thought of as a concept with certain functions, more than as a specific place, and currently the administration has

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<sup>7</sup> Following Vetlesen, we will not differ between moral and ethics as is done in other moral philosophical works, rather praxis is used to indicate actions or concrete behaviour, ethics designates reflections on this praxis, but also the praxis itself – as ethics here are tied to the specific and live situation.

<sup>8</sup> Emmanuel Levinas and Knud Ejler Løgstrup both see ethics as something existential, as an undeniable part of sociality and of being human. They speak of an essential inter-humanity that demands engagement – co-existence as co-commitment. It is not a choice or a rule, it is fundamental to existence. Levinas further discusses whether this affects human freedom, not to be able to avoid responsibility, but then also says that that "[t]he free human being is dedicated the Other, no one can be saved without the others." (Levinas, 2004, p.110; Løgstrup, 2008)

<sup>9</sup> All artists in these projects participate in other projects and also have separate productions.



moved closer to the city centre. Further, since its inception *the land foundation* has had a tripartite focus on ecology, meditation and cultural activity. Within the project framework, participants are involved with ecological farming, exhibitions, humanitarian work, workshops, yoga, meditation, seminars, alternative education, cultural exchange, cooking, writing, documentation, and more. The participants are mainly volunteers, art students or guests – there are also some employees within the administration. *The land foundation* develops through its activities; continuously planning and executing new projects, seminars, workshops and exhibitions, as well as engaging in different types of environmental, social and mental work.



Figure 5: Stage and buffaloes at the land, Sanpatong, 2006.

*Sørfinnset School / the nord land*, which started up in 2004 at Sørfinnset in the north of Norway under the direction of Søsja Jørgensen and Geir Tore Holm, encompasses a range of activities as varied as *the land foundation*. The project was directly inspired by *the land foundation*, and began as a part of a local governmental art funding called “Artistic Interruptions”, curated by Per Gunnar Eeg-Tverbakk. “Artistic Interruptions” was a project that sought to develop socially ‘site-specific’ projects, as a continuation of the sculptural ‘site-specific’ project “Artscape Nordland”. *Sørfinnset School / the nord land* is based on collaboration with the local community in the village of Sørfinnset, a small place with about 70-80 regular inhabitants (around 150 during the summer). The village is typical of northern Norway: it is surrounded by spectacular nature and has a rich cultural history, but today there are relatively few activities and few new jobs available – conditions for human habitation are growing meagre. The artists have sought to contribute through what they call ‘culture service’ in the local setting - meaning that they offer their cultural expertise, drive and energy to the local community in order to make something that is valuable to both the local community and themselves. Collaboration with the local community is a precondition of the project, which is based on events, dialogues and activities that require the local community’s interaction and participation. The sense of local ownership that has been established is therefore crucial.

*Sørfinnset School / the nord land* is a living project, on-going and with no predetermined duration. Like *the land foundation* it has become more and more complex as time has passed. It consists, among other things, of a piece of land with artist-built living units. These were constructed using preferably local materials according to ecological standards (a Thai house adapted for North Norwegian weather conditions, a Sami *gamme* and a tent sauna (“Hikki”). A kitchen, a toilet and other facilities are also planned.) The local school, which was in disuse, is inhabited by the artists when they are at Sørfinnset, and functions as a sort of cultural centre from which activities are organized (cafés, parties, performances, concerts, debates, lectures on local history, cooking, hiking trips, and more) and as a place where guests may stay. There is a space at the school for tents and caravans, as well as an outdoor bonfire place and a herb garden. They have also had a local radio project transmitting from the school’s loft during certain periods, Radio Kongo, and they served free coffee in summer – indicated by a road sign reading “Free coffee – 250m”. The properties associated with the project, Sørfinnset School and the area around Kjellingvann, are both owned by the local authorities, the municipality of Gildeskål. Currently however, the school is undergoing changes, and its future as the project’s centre has become uncertain.



Figure 6: Free coffee, Sørfinnset, 2006. Foto: Sørfinnset School / the nord land

Each summer an activity programme is prepared, and although events are added, changed or cancelled, this serves as a plan for action. In the following, the programmes from 2006-2008 are rendered<sup>10</sup>:

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<sup>10</sup> The programme for 2011 can be found on the *Sørfinnset School / the nord land* project blog <http://www.sorfinnsetskole.blogspot.com/>

Programme for 2006:

- 1 July: Activity day – Samis in Gildeskål, lecture near 'gamme'.
- 8 July: Activity day – Debate on art and tourism, serving local food.
- 15 July: Fish(ing) festival by UL Vårsol.
- 22 July: Tsunami memorial with Thai guests.
- 29 July: Olsok party (in remembrance of St. Olav who christened Norway) with artists, food and dance.
- Inauguration of flag monument by the cross section at Sørfinnset (by artist group aiPotu).

Programme for 2007:

- 7 May: Making local Radio Kongo with artist group Rakett at the MC Fair, BIT Teatergarasjen, Bergen
- 26 May: First Saturday café: Where do we stand in the project? Potato planting, spring preparations and brewing beer.
- 29 June: *Sørfinnset School / the nord land* at Transborder Café, Festspillene i Nord-Norge
- 30 June: Saturday café at school: Food from wild growing plants. Information.
- 7 July: Activity day; Samis in Gildeskål - the 'gamme' is 2 years old.
- Lecture about Sami place names and reindeer husbandry. Maintenance of the 'gamme'.
- 11-13 July: 'Tove'-workshop (craft technique) with Kristine Dybwad
- 14 July: Fish(ing) festival by UL Vårsol.
- 21 July: Saturday café. Topic: Art and Ecology.
- 27 July: Seminar: Art and Critique.
- 28 July: Summer party at the Thai house with entertainment, food and dance.
- 30 July-2 August: Participation at seminar/exhibition, Sparwasser/ Umwtter, Berlin
- 23 August-30 September: Sørfinnset School at 'Cross Talking', Christiansands Kunstforening.

Programme for 2008:

- 17-18 May: Potato planting, spring cleaning and maintenance of the school.
- Bonfire party at school on the 17th.
- Meeting about building of toilet *at the nord land*.
- 28 June: First Saturday café from 12-16, food from wild-growing plants.
- 5 July: The 'gamme' is three years old – celebration with serving of Sami specialities, lecture and maintenance.
- 19 July: Fish(ing) festival by UL Vårsol.
- 26 July: Summer party with stage acts and surprises.
- 28-30 July: Time for trips and excursions. Hiking in the mountains East of Sørfinnset, focus on philosophy and wild plants.
- 2 August: Last Saturday café of this season.
- 20 September: Potato-day in relation to harvest.

Other on-going and more long-term activities:

- Finish building the Thai house near Kjellingvann (finished 3. of August 2008)
- Build an “earth cellar” (room made of dirt and stone with wooden roof, made to preserve fruit and vegetables) at Gjelseth, near the school, for preservation of the grown potatoes– focus of summer 2008. There are also plans for making such an earth cellar at *the land* in Thailand.
- Put up a “tent sauna” – Hikki - designed by the artist Per Enokson (picture on first side).
- Make local radio at the school’s loft.
- Better conditions for fish in Kjellingvann - by Talleiv Taro Manum.
- Continue to grow and enhance the herb garden at Sørfinnset School.
- Organize various presentations, exhibitions, debates, excursions, etc.
- Run and repair the school building.
- ‘Skolekjøkken’ (cooking in the school’s kitchen) by Marius Notvik
- ‘Potato Perspectives’ by Åsa Sonjasdotter.
- Presentations of artists and other guests at the school.
- Plan toilet at the nord land/ Den glömda staden near Kjellingvann, by Liv Fjerdingsrein (to be realized during the summer of 2009).
- Plan and develop other buildings, for example a kitchen, near Kjellingvann.

## Conceptualizations of the sensuous

Structured around activity programmes, but built up of everyday social situations between participants, the ethicality of these projects relates to ‘ways of doing’ and the tensions of these actions unfolding. This is also where ethics and aesthetics converge: philosopher Jacques Rancière has written on the distribution of the sensible or sensuous as a political or ethical matter in itself. Rancière firstly expands the conception of aesthetics to include all sensuousness and secondly to include relations to and within this sensuousness. He further ties aesthetics to politics through the distribution or sharing of this sensuousness. What, in a society, do we hear and see, and what remains invisible and inaudible? Being sensed has social and political significance, and there is a ‘life constructive’ or ‘deconstructive’ power in the creation of sensuousness. How we perceive “reality” through our senses is thus a deeply political concern, and it is in the production of different landscapes of the sensuous that “art” can work politically. Rancière further proposes that it is how we relate or create relations through sensuousness that constitutes the political, meaning in the sharing of what is communal. Aesthetics is then understood as everything that concerns sensuousness – not as the more delimited notion tied to art, visuality and judgements of taste (Rancière, 2000).<sup>11</sup>

Rancière has what one could call a ‘conceptual’ approach: he does not reject or dismiss prevailing theories or systems, but through building scenarios he shows how and why they are unstable and/or can be thought about in several ways. Rancière both accepts and rejects art as a separate field. While speaking of parts of contemporary art as quite “secluded” and driven by specific people and a

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<sup>11</sup> In his argument Rancière takes the “original scenario” of aesthetics, the way he finds it described by philosopher Friedrich Schiller, as his point of departure: 1) art is a way to perceive/experience 2) aesthetic experience is heterogeneous and, 3) aesthetics is not just about art. Further, he holds that the politics of aesthetics are undecidable; art and aesthetics cannot be isolated from politics, but neither can art be used to fulfil political ambitions, because sensual perceptions can never be steered (Rancière, 2000).

particular discourse, he simultaneously includes art in a broader conception of aesthetics, seeing aesthetics as politics and politics as co-existence. Rancière suggests different demarcations and regimes, but also makes it clear that these are only *ways of thinking*, which at any time could be replaced by other perspectives giving rise to other conclusions. This very pragmatic approach to theory and terms such as art may offer a way out of the disillusion, death of utopias and lack of motivation that have haunted late-modern Western societies. At the end of *Le partage du sensible*, he suggests that we abandon the “impossibility” of utopia and instead think of *heterotopias*, thus moving from ‘non-place’ to ‘other-place’.

This way of thinking both about art and about conceptualizations of art is compatible with the practice found in several contemporary experimental projects, among them the ‘land projects’ described above. Art can be reduced to particular people in particular networks with power or be seen as a specific system or discourse, but these categorizations can also be overcome or transcended. Art does not have to be made up by a specific set of practices or questions: it may be as wide-ranging as “praxis” or a “project” related to a broad conception of aesthetics and history. Aesthetics is here understood in the broadest meaning of the term as encompassing whatever concerns the senses – not as associated in particular either with the visual or with “aesthetization”, that is, with judgements of taste and *good* or *right* visual form. However, aesthetics involves choosing a sensuous strategy or displaying particular sensuous matter, thereby becoming ethic-aesthetic. *The land foundation* and *Sørfinnset School / the nord land* work actively with the different relations between sensuousness and ethicality, but even though these projects can be said to be ideological or ecosophical, they do not follow a particular ideology and they have a specific ambition not to censor or suppress different expressions. Their structure is based on the participation of persons, groups and networks. If the people involved felt that they lacked influence, they would be less likely to keep on participating. This is particularly relevant in the north of Norway, where the Sørfinnset project is based on collaboration with a local community. If the local community felt ignored or set aside, they would not participate in parties, discussions and events.

Another important implication of Rancière’s co-thinking of politics and aesthetics, as it is displayed in the ‘land projects’, is the *social* or *shared* aspect of the aesthetic as it is made ethic. Our sensuous environments constitute our common grounds for experience, our common or “agreed-upon” reality. This consideration can also be linked to the fundamentally social and ethical dimension of the subject as described by de Beauvoir. Here, the ‘land projects’ can be understood as a critique of individualism and Western subjective culture – the art project is no longer a solo project, the structure of the aesthetic project in itself is *shared* or multiple, both in ownership as well as in ideas, modes and media. This critique of individualism ties the projects to an avant-garde tradition, as many experimental art projects from the historical avant-garde (Constructivists, Bauhaus) in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century through to the neo-avant-garde of the 1960s and 70s (John Cage, Situationists, Fluxus,) have worked with community and co-existence as essential values in “utopian constructions”. Although *the land foundation* is not a Western art project<sup>12</sup>, both Tiravanija and Lertchaiprasert were trained within an American art tradition and relate to contemporary Western art discourse in their work. Combined

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<sup>12</sup> The term Western is problematic, as it vaguely refers to Europe, North-America and Australia. However, it is a term in common use, which indicates a certain cultural tradition and dynamic. It also used in *the land foundation*’s catalogue to indicate something that differs from the Eastern or Thai tradition/dynamic. For this reason I use the term here, particularly to refer to a certain “Western art and avant-garde history”, that is, the history of art I assume is most commonly taught in the above mentioned regions. I am however aware of the problems associated with such stereotypical categorizations.

with their Thai and Buddhist background, the tensions between Western and Buddhist practices, as well as between Western and Buddhist theory, are played out. The 'land projects' focus on the projects' social or shared character, although they also emphasize personal expression and the importance of the individual's mental health. This perhaps because personal spaces in Buddhist thinking are also seen *as* social spaces and the constitution of the individual identity is fundamentally dependent on the sense of community. In Buddhism, meditation is a path to enlightenment and inner peace – a way to control the “ego” in order to contribute more and better to a common community (Harvey, 1990). Meditation and personal mental contemplation are thus considered vital to the community and the sense of community.

## **Ecosophy as a relational and practice-near research ideology**

The reactivating of social space without closing the personal space is a key aspect in the ideological navigation of the 'land projects'. In his *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, Gregory Bateson discusses flexibility, that is, an ability to change or adapt in relation to human sociality, intellectuality and nature:

I suggest then that a healthy ecology of human civilization would be defined somewhat as follows: A single system of *environment combined with human civilization* in which the flexibility of the civilization shall match that of the environment to create an on-going complex system, open-ended for slow change of even basic (hard-programmed) characteristics. (Bateson, 2000, p.502)

A problem for the ecosopher then, whose overreaching goal is flexibility, is the need to insist, even tyrannically, on this flexibility in order for it to persist. Deleuze and Guattari were inspired by Bateson, and their insistence on 'becoming' might be seen as related to Bateson's focus on flexibility. Bateson continues: “From all of this it follows that to maintain the flexibility of a given variable, either that flexibility must be *exercised*, or the encroaching variables must be directly controlled” (Bateson, 2000, p.511). Accordingly we underline the importance of immediate manoeuvring, of singular choice and action.<sup>13</sup>

Returning to the ethics presented in the ecosophy of Guattari, we are prompted to connect and co-think mentality, sociality and environment. The concept of ecology indicates the organic character that any non-moralistic and affective ethicality must have, based on the *sustainable balance* of subject, community and nature/environment. This is implied in Guattari's work as well as in the ecosophy of Næss. Ecological relationality is a given, not a choice, but ecology opens up many possible choices, many possible ethicalities. Ethics is not only non-moralistic, it is also affective as well as non-coherent or discontinuous. Despite the focus here on ethicality and sustainability, I wish to stress again that ecological systems do not indicate harmonious zones or conflict free wholes, *collaboration and co-existence always involve conflicts of interests and negotiation*. It is the complex organization, the possible consideration of “everything” and the finely scaled balance that makes ecology a valid perspective, and that makes it a life perspective where a common work or project can be realized on the basis of, not by the elimination of, difference: all relations have to be based on and consist of difference and disagreement (Mouffe, 2000; Mouffe & Laclau, 2001). For example, in ecological studies one of the defined forms of interaction, *mutualism*, where both parties are benefitting from a

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<sup>13</sup> Philosopher Rosi Braidotti criticizes Arne Næss for displaying an in-the-end anthropocentric universalism through his deep ecology; by including all, she says, in a holistic and spiritual manner, man's mind dominates nature even if it seeks the opposite. An ecosophy must thus be more actively manoeuvred and more willfully fragmented (Braidotti, 2006, p. 115-117).

relationship, is seen as reciprocal exploitation rather than cosy partnership (Begon, Townsend & Harper, 2006, p. 381).

Within the experimental praxis of the land projects, there are at least three ecologies at work – physical, social and mental. These are investigated and co-thought, both in relation to ecology and to ethics. One could say that the projects organize their activities as *research*, as *ways of wondering*, about trivial, practical, theoretical and spiritual issues, with a particular focus on connections between perceived dichotomies such as the trivial and the spiritual, the practical and the theoretical. This ethic-aesthetic way of wondering, I would say, is becoming an artistic strategy as well a sign of our hybrid and multi-medial times. As knowledge and information travels fast from field to field, both interdisciplinarity and multidisciplinary create larger grounds for action, and the distances between scholar and artist, student and teacher are diminished.



Figure 7: Author and musician David Rothenberg playing in front of the Sørfinnset ‘free coffee’ sign at Kunstnernes Hus, Oslo, 2010. Courtesy of ‘Gentle Actions’, Eva Bakkeslett and Anne Karin Jortveit.

## Aesthetic research

In the Norwegian art exhibition venue Kunstnernes Hus, from the 23<sup>rd</sup> October to 14<sup>th</sup> November 2010, the two artists Eva Bakkeslett and Anne Karin Jortveit organized their ‘Gentle Actions’ project as a series of lectures, talks, workshops, materialities and interventions around the concepts of art, ecology and action. The aim was to expand the possible artistic approaches to art and ecology, amongst others by including authorities from different fields (food, agriculture, literature, architecture, economy, art, and more) as well as mixing art and science, experience and research. In addition to an introductory conference and a multiplicity of discussions, they knitted a “reef”, made sourdough

bread, organized a concert, cultivated a garden from which they served vegetables during the project period, and in general made people meet and think, locally and internationally. They recorded and documented, wrote and listened. During three intense weeks they presented an *ethic-aesthetic way of wonders*, where different physical, social and intellectual strategies were employed to research and rethink aspects of ecology. Their aim was precisely to wonder, as well as to deliver a series of ‘gentle actions’ towards the public and society. The concept of ‘gentle action’ was originated by F. David Peat, physicist and founder of the Pari Center for New Learning, who also was a keynote speaker at the introductory seminar. In his book *Gentle Action – Bringing Creative Change to a Turbulent World* from 2008 Peat describes the concept of ‘gentle action’ as:

...The creative sorts of activities and actions that could be taken when people are sensitive to the dynamics of their surrounding environment. It could be a form of minimal but highly intelligent activity that arises out of the very nature of the system under investigation... Gentle Action is subtle in nature so that a minimal intervention, intelligently made, can result in a major change or transformation. The reason is that such action makes use of the dynamics of the whole system in question. (Peat, 2008, p.141)

Peat thus envisages a kind of problem solving, either intellectual or practical, which combines scientific and creative capacities in the most appropriate ways. In particular Peat addresses the often mechanical and rigid solutions that we rely on in almost all our societal systems. Although the objectives are well-meant, the actions taken to achieve them are often inappropriate, because people fail to grasp the complexity of the situations that they are in. One could say that this is true of many bureaucratic systems, where the options made available to the system users are generally mechanical and pre-designed, leaving little or no room for creativity or tailored solutions. Peat instead suggests the use of ‘creative suspense’, that is, a period of *sensuous non-acting* – a moment of orientation into current complexities where possible ways of acting are allowed to arise *in* and *from* the situation, rather than being determined from a pre-rehearsed scheme. Emergency medical personnel, for example, often use such a moment of non-acting while they are evaluating possible damages in an accident, their primary guideline being ‘not to do any harm’. Peat thus invites us to act less and create more, that is, to allow for other forms of knowledge production than those which are already systemically established. In this context we can also connect creativity to a higher degree of sensuous awareness – Peat writes: “Artists, composers, scientists and other creative people often describe how their work unfolds from a creative form of “listening”. These acts of listening and watchfulness have the effect of dissolving rigidities and rendering a system more flexible.” (Peat, 2008, p.88). ‘Creative suspense’, which is also a metaphor for allowing sensuous and instinctive information to emerge, calls for non-action in a time of frenetic action, as well as suggesting the importance of sensuousness and creativity to science and learning as a way to include other and more complex notions. Intelligence is thus the capacity to rely on creativity and sensuous orientation, and is a concern of practice. Further, the relations between practice and theory, practice and research, and research and learning, become blurred and intertwined, because they not only depend on each other, but are all parts of the same ‘gentle action’.

Acknowledgement of our sensuous existence and the significance of sensuous information is also central to the work of another ecosopher who attended the Norwegian ‘Gentle Actions’ project. David Abram draws on classic phenomenological research by Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty to remind us of the necessity of 1) attaching all knowledge and experience to a sensuous subject and 2) co-thinking the subjects experience and cognition with the sensing body and its sensuous environments (Abram, 1997). Central to this is the understanding of our *understanding* as completely reliant on our everyday, sensuous world and the fact that our cognition is a part of our experiential



sphere.<sup>14</sup> Art in this theoretical and ecosophical framework, represents a more *experiential and experimental form of knowledge production and processing*, because it allows for such a practical-theoretical synthesis, for creative suspense and sensuous knowledge. However, it is not a matter of indifference how or what we see or hear, this is tightly interwoven into our ideological outset. We have now come full circle: to underline ethic-aesthetic dimensions is important because the connections and relations between the two are vast and many, but to underline these dimensions also becomes a political or counteractive insistence, with reference to Jacques Rancière. As all aesthetics is in some way political, so is all science political. What we chose to see and hear, as with what we choose to research, is a matter of prioritisation, of choice, and of ethicality.



Figure 8: ‘The Oslo Reef’, knitted corals, Kunstnernes Hus 2010. Courtesy of ‘Gentle Actions’, Eva Bakkeslett and Anne Karin Jortveit

To more overtly include political ambitions in research, is problematic, as is any research that seeks a particular result or argument. Nevertheless, most research today is part of a national research strategy and is thus a result of a political focus. As a major global challenge, environmental research is an overt ambition for most research strategies. However, a more sophisticated idea of the nature ecology should be a further ambition. Environmental issues are not only physical and associated with the natural world; they are also social and mental. It is thus not only about driving a car, but about *the reason* for driving it. The answer to this question might be very trivial, such as logistical challenges, but it is also deeply bound to an entire lifestyle and identity. Ecological sustainability is thus not only a matter of environmental constitution and preservation, but of individual and social constitution and preservation as well.

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<sup>14</sup>In the paper “The Knowing Body; Art as an Integrative System of Knowledge”, John Danvers traces different theories of the sensuous and points out that making sense is a sensuous matter from an art educational perspective –Danvers concludes that the cognitive functions of the arts parallels those of the (natural) sciences (Danvers, 2006).



Figure 9: Workshop with fermentation activist and author Sandor Ellix Katz, Kunstneres Hus, Oslo, 2010. Courtesy 'Gentle Actions', Eva Bakkeslett and Anne Karin Jortveit.

## Concluding

Although multi-faceted and disharmonious, the ecosophical perspective provides an ethical direction to research practice. Further, by turning to biology and nature we could find words and concepts that give more elastic, dynamic, and fluctuating theoretical takes on reality, but that nevertheless are visible, physical and concrete. *Ecology, mutuality, synthesis, symbiosis, rhizome, chaosmosis* (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004) and *radicant* (Bourriaud, 2010) are examples of such concepts seeking to grasp a natural complexity and an organic character on paper, further moving them into the human everyday sphere, making them part of an ecosophy – an ecology of mind, as Gregory Bateson puts it. The ecological approach is used for many reasons, but key notions are its necessary *relationality*, its focus on *sustainability*<sup>15</sup>, an opening towards *organic thinking* and its *ethic-aesthetic* dimensions. Ecology indicates a mutuality or relationality in a hyper-complex whole, where every part has a role and importance. Ecosophy is a way to think about connectedness in an un-simplified, yet ordered manner, and as an “ordering” of things, ecology in many ways implies a non-order. It is relational, but without ever really being pre-destined or predictable. The ecological perspective has an organic purposefulness: it can be completely unexpected, yet it is not necessarily random. In their study on ecology, Michael Begon, Colin R. Townsend and John L. Harper point out the difference between *random* and *chaotic dynamics* (Begon, Townsend & Harper, 2006, p. 150). The main difference being that the random dynamic contains no differentiable patterns. Chaotic dynamics contain certain discernable patterns, but are characterized by such fluctuation and multiplicity/variety that the prediction of future patterns or outcomes becomes impossible or inefficient. Chaos in this context is thus not simply randomness and confusion, making phenomena impossible to understand, it is the impossibility of prediction and the possibility of a tiny movement causing a major change in the system or theory (Lorenz, 1963). These two central elements – not relying on pre-existing solutions and aiming for minor actions that instigate major changes, was also pointed out by physicist and ecosopher Peat as current “ways of acting”. With the basis in relationality, sustainability, organic

<sup>15</sup> Sustainable here means enduring or maintainable, meaning an overall balancing creating good or prosperous living conditions – that is, conditions that make something last or that enable lasting relations.

thought systems and ethic-aesthetic approaches, we could thus add the need for *immediacy*, or the constant evaluation of the here and now, as a vital part of the ecosophic research mode. In addition we have to consider the interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary or holistic approaches used in most ecosophic projects, whether theoretical or practical, often both.

Concluding, we could say that art, particularly certain contemporary ecosophy-based projects, represents a more experiential and experimental form of knowledge production and processing, because it allows for a practical-theoretical synthesis, creative suspense as well as sensuous knowledge. Suggesting further relevance, the ecosophic perspective could constitute a relational and practice-near research ideology where the sensuous or aesthetic dimensions have a more natural or prominent role. This is also relevant for education and learning in general: as part of our ecological or environmental competence, aesthetic strategies need to become more prevalent in science and education systems – not only as design, production, craft and visual competence, but also as a fundamental part of our epistemology, our relation with the world, *as our world*. When seeking to act more gently with regard to our environment, we may bear in mind that ethics demands choices not only of action but also of sensuousness. In doing so, what you create, either mentally or materially, will be your ethic.



Figure 10: Working in the ‘artist’s garden’, Kunstnernes Hus, Oslo 2010. Courtesy ‘Gentle Actions’, Eva Bakkeslett and Anne Karin Jortveit.

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